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Garuda and Eagle: Do Birds of A (Democratic) Feather Fly Together?

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GARUDA AND EAGLE:
DO BIRDS OF A (DEMOCRATIC) FEATHER FLY TOGETHER?

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Is the democratization of Indonesia affecting its relations with the US? Yes, but not always in anticipated ways.

Indonesian-American relations in Soeharto's time were not always smooth. But the volatility came mainly (not wholly) in the form of NGO and Congressional criticism in the US in response to human rights violations in Indonesia. In Washington DC the executive branch was not always supportive of the Indonesian government, but many of the occasions when, for example, the State Department criticized events or conditions in Indonesia were prompted by American legislative pressure. Without such pressure, including pressure by NGOs, would the Dili massacre have prompted the US to suspend inter-military (mil-mil) relations with Indonesia? Probably not.

An idealized image of necessarily friendly democracies would extend the negatively phrased "democratic peace" thesis, that democracies don't fight each other, to the positively wishful thought that by virtue of having (relatively) accountable governments, democracies are bound to get along. But such a "democratic amity" thesis is untenable. It was easier for DC to deal with Jakarta when power was concentrated in the hands of a man who, notwithstanding his Javanist style or, at any rate, proverbs, upheld a version of the anti-communist assumptions that drove much of US foreign policy during the Cold War while lifting his country's macro-economic indicators and welcoming FDI.

Now that both countries are democratic—a rough likeness that hides many differences—one could argue that Indonesian-US interactions, far from being smoother, as "democratic amity" would have it, should be more turbulent. For now that power no longer clearly resides in one place in the archipelago, Indonesian as well as American pluralism can contribute to instability in the relationship.

I don't want to take this argument too far. Domestic political conflict need not have a centrifugal effect on foreign policy. The character of the two countries' respective presidents, including what they (do not) say and (do not) do, still matters greatly. America may be a democracy, but George W. Bush is still in charge of the "*unitary* executive," as he and his power-concentrating vice-president would put it (minus the italics).

The unilateralist, interventionist temptation in which the Bush administration has indulged, most notably in Iraq, has not been popular in Indonesia. To the extent that Indonesia has democratized, that unpopularity, especially in politically active Muslim circles, cannot be ignored by the Istana in Jakarta. Nostalgia for Soeharto inside Indonesia is often referred to. But that sentiment has perhaps not been entirely limited to (some) Indonesians. During the revolving-door presidencies that marked the early (1998-2004) phase of *reformasi*, it would have been surprising if a few of the older "Indonesia hands" inside the Beltway had not privately recalled the merits of dealing with the same head of government over a longer period of time.

Comparably one may ask to what extent Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono runs a unitary executive these days in Indonesia? And to the extent that democracy has pluralized not only that executive but also the now semi-bicameral legislature and the regional governments as well, through *desentralisasi* including the direct election of governors, regents, and mayors, just how much has the potential for volatility in US-Indonesian relations been enlarged?

In this context, among many aware Americans, SBY is the not-GWB. It is almost as easy for an American audience to be impressed with SBY as it is for an Indonesian one to be annoyed by GWB. The image of vigor and competence (and, yes, democratic preference) that SBY projects to most (not all, but most) Americans who are cognizant of him and his country, including officials in DC, shows how the character of a leader can matter in a pluralized setting. Indeed, one could argue, it is precisely the potentially disruptive impact of democratization on a country's foreign policy that makes the rise of a "good" *and* "strong" leader in that country all the more valuable to its foreign partners. In this context it is perhaps telling that one is far more likely to hear complaints about SBY's indecisiveness in Jakarta than in DC. At least that has been my experience.

Part of this inter-democratic volatility stems from contingency—unforeseen watershed events that have little if anything to do with democracy. Four that have greatly impacted Indonesian-American relations are, of course:

(a) the attacks in the US on 11/9/2001;

(b) the sequence of annual terrorist bombings in Bali and Jakarta in 2002-2005;

(c) the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003; and

(d) the 26/12/2004 Indian-ocean tsunami that has apparently taken some 170,000 Indonesian lives.

If I may oversimplify: The first of these events—9/11—elicited widespread Indonesian sympathy that eventually turned to antipathy as US foreign policy became more and more monovalently and unilaterally focused on the "global war on terror" to the exclusion of much if not all else.[1] Facilitating this decline in support was the valorization of political

[1] "For a lot of Americans," Vice-President Dick Cheney said recently, "9/11 has sort of receded into the past[,] ... and I think there are a lot of people out there that don't think about it every day. ... That's not

Islam in democratizing Indonesia—political Islam not as a modernist elite to be appended to the New Order in the form of semi-official support for ICMI, but as a widespread, religiously sensitized constituency worth courting for its votes and not alienating for fear of being portrayed in a no-longer-reticent media as opposed to Islam itself. In this respect, political pluralism in Indonesia far from sustaining sympathy for the US government—democratic amity—sped the distancing of Indonesian opinion from its American counterpart.

Interestingly in the present setting of rising (but still rather limited) American anger with the Bush administration on civil liberties grounds—Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, so-called "renditions," and domestic electronic surveillance without a warrant—the gap between Indonesian and American public opinion, as regards counter-terrorism in particular, may have begun to narrow. Note, however, that a second major attack by Al Qaeda on American soil could effectively silence the case for civil liberties. Would such an event elicit renewed sympathy in Indonesia sufficient to override local perceptions of arrogant American interventionism? Or would Indonesians, at least privately and partly, justify the attack as a bully's comeuppance? Indonesians would be divided, I should think, but toward which view would their net opinion tilt? These questions have been made less academic by the recent statement, apparently by Osama bin Laden, that preparations are underway for just such an attack.[2] I would welcome answers by Indonesian colleagues at this conference.

The sequence of terrorist bombings inside Indonesia in 2002-2005 would appear to have had an increasingly negative effort on Indonesian sympathy for militant Islamism. I would not speculate on whether, as some observers have privately argued, this is because of the loss of Indonesian as opposed to foreign lives. At a time when the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) has taken stands against various aspects of democracy, one also senses increasing impatience among Muslim leaders, arguably including the leadership of MUI itself, with Islamist terrorism inside Indonesia.[3] Clearly such a combination is not predicted by the notion that approval of democracy and disapproval of terrorism ought to imply one another.

As for the US invasion of Iraq, was Indonesian disapprobation based on the idea that the US was not acting like the democracy that it claimed to be? Or was that disapproval rather an objection to the obvious violation of sovereignty that had occurred, combined with a relative insensitivity on the part of Indonesians (compared with Americans) to the lack of democracy in Iraq and the attendant violations of Iraqi human rights by Saddam Hussein? Or was the sticking point the occupation of a *Muslim* land—Al Qaeda's core complaint? Or all three, and if so, in what proportions? Again, I would be interested in the views of Indonesian colleagues. My own tentative and uninformed guess is that the second and third considerations may have mattered more than the first.

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really an option the president and I have. We think about it every day. We're briefed about it every day." As quote in "Managing Dangerous Times," *U.S. News & World Report*, 23 January 2006, p. 4. "It" in the last two sentences quoted presumably refers to the threat of terrorism generally and not to "9/11" as a discrete historical event, notwithstanding the semantic expansion that iconic date has undergone in Bush administration discourse.

[2] "The World This Week," *The Economist*, 21 January 2006, p. 6.

[3] "Islamist terrorism" is of course not a phrase that MUI and other Islamist organizations would use.

Finally, of course, we know that *humanitarian* American intervention in a Muslim land—Aceh—to help alleviate post-tsunami suffering, intervention of course with Jakarta's permission (or at any rate forbearance), did lower the Pew poll numbers on Indonesian attitudes from highly to more modestly negative regarding the United States. Again, however, how much was democracy involved in this partial turnaround of opinion? What mattered was the US effort's scale, speed, and efficacy—the ship-to-shore flights from the Abraham Lincoln—and these features could have characterized assistance from any technologically equipped country, democratic or authoritarian. As for allowing the Americans in, Soeharto could have done that too. Indeed he would have had less to worry about in making that decision, given his relative lack of accountability to Indonesians, including nationalists who might have cringed at the thought of a foreign military presence on Indonesian ground, however well motivated and urgently needed.

As for American perceptions of Indonesia in relation to Indonesian democracy, the standard introduction of Indonesia to American audiences, viewers, or readers by US commentators, including officials, now includes the tag line that Indonesia is "the third largest democracy in the world." Such references improve somewhat the default image of Indonesia in relevant American eyes, and that does yield a somewhat increased benefit of the doubt regarding what goes on in Indonesia.

The implication is that Indonesian democracy affects US policy at the margin. Here, paraphrased, is part of a recent interview with a knowledgeable observer of US policy-making on Indonesia:

> Democracy in Indonesia has mattered here in Washington *on balance*. Take the resumption of mil-mil relations last year. Conservative Republicans and their allies in the Defense Department were already impatient to resume; they thought cooperation between the two militaries was a good thing regardless of whether Indonesia was democratic or not. Counter-terrorism was the key for them. But liberal Democrats and their NGO allies thought the opposite: inter-military cooperation was a bad thing. The democratization of Indonesia allowed elements in the latter group to shift toward favoring resumption. And that is why resumption did, in the end, occur.[4]

Another knowledgeable American source put it this way: "Democracy [in Indonesia] makes it easier [for us] to swallow some of the things that are happening over there—things we don't like, such as human rights violations."[5]

Are American policymakers sensitive to Indonesian public opinion now that, post-New Order, it can be so much more freely expressed? Doubtless they were pleased at the uptick in American popularity following the tsunami. But they do not really take into account Indonesian public opinion—as opposed to the views and actions of Indonesian opinion-makers, especially government leaders. Beyond the ups and downs of US popularity, known through the poll results from Pew among other survey-research outfits,

[4] Source A, interviewed by phone, 17-1-2006.
[5] Source B, interviewed by phone, 18-1-2006.

most of the movers and shakers in DC are not aware enough of the details of Indonesian conditions to know what Indonesian opinions are.

American policymakers do know that even-driven attitudes are highly mutable. Foreign public opinion, in the words of still another informed US source, "can quickly turn against us. ... There is [here in DC] a sober understanding that public opinion is fickle and depends on events."[6]

American attitudes toward Indonesia also depend on events. Indonesia-concerned policymakers in DC read the morning paper, watch Fox or CNN, and when Indonesia figures in the news, they expect the phone to ring and begin to formulate a response. The result is a reactive, patchwork ad hocery in which proactively long-range thoughts, let alone plans, are scarce. Indonesia today, Bolivia tomorrow, Iraq all the time.

All the more striking in such an intermittent environment for Indonesia policy is the speech delivered by Deputy Assistant Secretary State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Eric John to an audience convened by the US-Indonesia Society in DC on 20 December 2005. The talk was entitled "The U.S. and Indonesia: Toward a Strategic Partnership." In it John referred to "our developing strategic partnership with Indonesia," as if it were already underway. "*A strategic partnership is in both our interests*," he argued in italics in his text.[7]

But what does a "strategic partnership" mean? It could be understood, in its widest sense, as an affirmation of across-the-board agreement—a full meshing of interests. John cites the democratization of Indonesia as an important trend facilitating the partnership. Yet a partnership is one thing, an alliance quite another. "*We are moving to a new stage with Indonesia,*" wrote John, again in italics, "*concentrating not on what we can't do together, but on what we can.*"[8] The language is revealing in its acceptance of limits—the limits presumably that distinguish a partnership from something more thoroughly consensual.

Is the balance between, in John's terms, what can and what can't be done together shifting in favor of the former? It may well be. But how much of such a warming trend is attributable to Indonesian democracy as compared with other factors—including, for instance, an American need to have more friends in the Muslim world and thus to belie the assertion that the US is waging war on Islam.

A strategic partnership? I asked two informed sources, one American, one Indonesian, to comment on John's idea, which received little coverage in the US, perhaps in part because it was launched only five days before Christmas, when much of DC and the rest of the country was on, or getting ready to go on, vacation. The American said, "I don't know what strategic partnership means. ... This appears to be a reaction to Chinese smile diplomacy."[9] Another American I spoke with concurred that John's initiative might well

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[6] Source C, interviewed by phone, 17-1-2006.
[7] Eric G. John, "The U.S. and Indonesia: Toward a Strategic Partnership," a talk sponsored by the US-Indonesia Society, Washington, DC, 20 December 2005, pp. 2 (first phrase) and 4 (second phrase).
[8] John, "The U.S. and Indonesia," p. 6.
[9] Source A, phone interview, 17-1-2006.

be, to a degree, an effort to play catch-up diplomacy in the light of Chinese success at wooing Southeast Asia.

My Indonesian informant said he wasn't sure what a "strategic partnership" was. It all depended on how the Americans wanted to fill that term with content. This source implied that a "strategic partnership" was not all that special. China had such named relations with many countries.[10]

I don't wish to infer from such skepticism that John's initiative was meaningless. Not at all. Democracy and a shared experience of terrorism, as he pointed out, both constitute (non-military!) bases on which closer cooperation can and, to a degree, already has occurred. If that implies a strategic partnership, so be it.

That said, however, to the extent that the US-Indonesian relations are, if not hostage to events, certainly affected by them, one can wonder not only about how close such a partnership can be. (Remember Indonesia's classically "free and independent" foreign policy?) One can also question whether the basis for a robustly "strategic" relationship really exists. According to my skeptical American source, "there is no strategic thinking here [in DC] on Indonesia."[11] I am less convinced of that, and more inclined to credit John (and others in the executive branch) with trying to think at least in the medium term across a broader policy horizon. Then again, speaking of horizons, I live three time zones removed from the Beltway, here in "outer island" California. As Montaigne once said in a different context, *Que sais-je?*

Let me end these notes by noting the ongoing impact of another event in Indonesian-American relations. Recently, I understand, the widow of one of two Americans killed a few years back near Timika in Papua attended at a court proceeding in Jakarta in connection with that murder and the recent arrest of several suspects. She may be, as I write, on her way back to the US, and I expect she will in time return to Congress and share her updated sense of whether justice in her late husband's case has been served—or not.

It is encouraging that the arrests were made.[12] Belatedly, the Indonesian government, with FBI cooperation, may be moving forward toward solving the case. But what if those who were arrested persuasively implicate the Indonesian military in the Timika attack? Will the new rule of law in Indonesia sustain a prosecution of anyone inside the armed forces who may have been responsible for what occurred? (One may ask the same question of the investigation into who murdered Munir by poisoning him on a Garuda flight.)

US-Indonesian relations are not hostage to a satisfactory resolution of the Timika affair. If they were, mil-mil relations would not have been restored. But the ongoing repercussions of this crime illustrate the contingencies I have sought to highlight in these notes. Legal proceedings to judge and punish the guilty imply the rule of law, an aspect

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[10] Source D, interviewed by phone in Indonesia, 18-1-2006.
[11] Source A, phone interview, 17-1-2006.
[12] See, for example, Raphael Pura and Murray Hiebert, "Indonesian Arrests Could Bolster Ties with U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 January 2006, p. A8.

of successful democracy. What happened near Timika appears to have been an act of terrorism.

To return full circle to my point of departure: The US is a democracy. So is Indonesia. Both oppose terrorism. Yet this does not imply the smooth affinity that "democratic amity" would lead us to expect.

[drafted on 20/22-1-2006]